

## Teacher Hiring, Transfer and Assignment in Portland Public Schools

Executive Summary  
August 2007

### Background and Methodology

Between November 2006 and June 2007, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) engaged in an extensive review of teacher staffing policies and practices in Portland Public Schools (PPS). TNTP investigated the impact of PPS staffing rules through several avenues, including:

- Review of PPS Teachers contract
- Analysis of Human Resources transaction data
- Surveys of:
  - 40 percent of nearly 500 PPS teachers who changed schools in the last two years
  - Nearly 250 PPS teacher applicants who withdrew from the application process
  - Over 70 percent of PPS principals
- Interviews with Portland principals and central office staff

Partial funding for this project was provided by a private grant to Portland Public Schools. A significant portion of the work was funded by The New Teacher Project as part of its national research initiative around effective school staffing.

After receiving input during its initial briefings for PPS staff, board members, and the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), The New Teacher Project made a number of revisions to its first draft. In particular, out of respect for the agency and autonomy of the Hiring, Assignment, and Transfer Committee, which is scheduled to begin discussions about policy reforms this fall, TNTP has omitted specific policy recommendations at this time. Instead, it has provided detailed data and findings to inform the Committee's proceedings. TNTP trusts that, through genuine collaboration and with a focus on the best interests of students, the members of the Committee will bring forward innovative solutions to these pressing problems.

### Summary

The New Teacher Project believes that the teachers and principals who work with students every day are the backbone of the school system. Helping them perform at a peak level will lead to greater student achievement. However, Portland currently operates under staffing rules that hamper the efforts of the district and teachers union to build and maintain the highest quality workforce. TNTP believes that a number of staffing issues must be addressed to meet Portland's long-term academic goals for its students.

#### **(1) PPS is not competing effectively with peer districts for the best new teachers.**

Data reveal that new teacher hiring in Portland is significantly delayed by a lengthy internal hiring process and that Portland loses large numbers of teacher candidates to surrounding districts, including many of its own student teachers. As a consequence, PPS hires disproportionately from the pool of candidates who apply late to the district. The hiring timeline appears to be the greatest cause of Portland's disadvantage in competing with peer

**77%**

**Of applicant  
withdrawers said that  
the hiring timeline was  
"important" or "very  
important" in their  
decision to withdraw**

**72%**

**Of principals report  
that they have  
frequently or  
occasionally had to hire  
an internal candidate  
over a more desirable  
external candidate**

districts for new hires. In the long term, Portland will impair its ability to increase student achievement and to close its substantial achievement gap if it cannot hire top talent from the applicant pool.

Additionally, even when the staffing process is opened up to all teacher candidates, rules conferring significant preference to internal candidates regularly prevent principals from hiring promising external applicants. These policies restrict options for principals in building effective instructional teams and discourage some external candidates from pursuing positions with PPS altogether.

**(2) Portland teachers are often forced into positions they do not choose and schools are regularly forced to hire teachers they do not want and who may not be a good fit for the job.**

The current contract between PPS and the PAT outlines a structure for teacher staffing that includes three “rounds” of job postings. Teachers expressed satisfaction with Rounds 1 and 3; unfortunately, most teachers are hired during Round 2, which relies heavily on forced placement as a staffing strategy. Specifically, it requires that unplaced teachers with relatively little seniority (those with less than three years in PPS) and those returning from leaves of absence be forced into positions without an interview process. The Round 2 process does not ensure that teachers are placed into positions that are agreeable for both those teachers and the schools’ administrators. Teachers receive minimal information about the placement process as it happens, leading to teacher frustration and decreased satisfaction with teaching positions. The process is deeply unpopular with teachers and administrators alike. Forced placements offer little opportunity for principals or teachers to consider school fit. Indeed, teachers are often slotted into grade levels with which they have limited or no experience merely because those positions are the only ones available for which the teacher is licensed.

**16%**  
Of teachers who were  
force placed in 2005  
(through Round 2)  
left the system by the  
following year, as  
compared to only 5%  
of those who  
interviewed for their  
positions

Over the last two years, Round 2 transfers (forced placements) were the most common type of transfer for *both* probationary and contract teachers. Being forced into a placement without consent results in significantly higher attrition and serial mobility among teachers. In fact, teachers who are slotted into positions through Round 2 are more than twice as likely as other transferring teachers to leave Portland Public Schools within one year. Further, just 37 percent of unassigned teachers (the group most likely to be placed during Round 2) report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with the positions they received through the Portland transfer process.

**37%**  
Of new teachers hired  
in 2004 left the  
district by the fall of  
2006, as compared to  
13% of all other  
teachers in the same  
time period

**(3) Teachers new to the district are treated as expendable.**

An exceptionally high percentage of teachers hired into Portland Public Schools leave the district within only a few years.<sup>1</sup> Two specific district policies disadvantage these teachers and contribute significantly to the attrition rate. The first is a policy that requires any teacher hired into a position arising after the start of the school year to be considered “temporary,” which means that, at the end of the school year, they have no right to retain their position and the position must be treated as a vacancy.<sup>2</sup> Even if a principal wishes to re-hire the temporary teacher, the position is likely to be filled with a Round 2 assignment

<sup>1</sup> District data shows that 37% of new teachers hired for fall 2004 were no longer teaching at a PPS school just two years later.

<sup>2</sup> “Temporary” teachers are not less qualified than other teachers or uncertified. The label simply confers lesser job security for teachers hired into certain positions.

before the principal has that opportunity. Principals have no recourse to protect top-performing temporary teachers under current rules and, as a result, the attrition of new teachers is needlessly high as displaced temporary teachers accept positions in other districts.

Teachers new to the district are also disadvantaged when schools in surplus situations are required to make position cuts. In such situations, contract policy requires “Unassignment” of the least senior teacher in the area requiring reduction, regardless of performance.<sup>3</sup> Again, principals have no recourse to protect top-performing teachers who have not accumulated a large number of years in the district, even when those teachers have been specially trained to implement specific school programs or curricula. When newer teachers (those with fewer than three years of PPS experience) are released from their positions because of budgetary cuts, they are contractually prohibited from participating in Round 1 of hiring, which virtually guarantees that they will be forced into a new, non-consensual position through the district’s Round 2 process. Therefore, teachers new to the district are disproportionately prone to these forced placements compared to more senior teachers.<sup>4</sup> Forced placements and displacement of temporary teachers encourages many newer PPS teachers to leave Portland for surrounding districts. These policies do not respect the contributions of teachers and are not cost-effective or strategic with respect to advancing student achievement in Portland.

#### **(4) PPS Human Resources can and should take steps in the near term to alleviate internal procedural problems.**

In general, the feedback from principals about the communication and support they received from Human Resources was favorable. However, there are a number of areas for improvement identified by teachers, principals, and applicants. One such area is lack of communication from the district to new teacher applicants and incumbent teachers participating in the transfer and hiring process. Many teachers who are new to the district do not understand that PPS’s staffing policies cause the delays they experience in the hiring timeline. Without a cohesive district outreach effort, applicants tend to assume that the district hires late because it is disorganized or uninterested in them as candidates, and they exit the process with a low opinion of Portland Public Schools.

Applicants, incumbent teachers and principals voiced a variety of other suggestions and complaints as well. New applicants often referred positively to user-friendly online application systems used by competitor districts but not PPS. Incumbent teachers reported receiving relatively little communication from HR about the transfer process, especially the Round 2 slotting process. Finally, principals expressed concern about a lack of diversity in the teacher applicant pool.

## **Conclusion**

The New Teacher Project’s analysis shows significant areas of concern regarding the hiring, assignment, and transfer processes in Portland Public Schools. TNTP believes the data make clear that the current staffing system is broadly ineffective for stakeholders and participants, and that it leads to almost universal frustration. Portland’s teachers, schools and students deserve better. Reforms to the current rules and processes can result in improved teacher satisfaction with the hiring system, improved school-level morale, and greater collaboration between teachers and administrators.

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Not all teachers who are “new” to Portland are teachers without prior full-time experience. A large number of teachers hired by PPS have accumulated years of experience elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> Of non-contract teachers moving schools in 2005 and 2006, 84% were placed through the Round 2 process compared to just 52% of contract teachers, making non-contract teachers who transfer 60% more likely to be impacted by Round 2.

As stated above, TNTP supports the role of the HAT Committee in determining the shape of these reforms and, as such, has omitted specific policy recommendations at this time. However, dramatic improvements for teachers and schools in Portland can be realized by taking a collaborative approach that respects the needs of both principals and teachers in school staffing. The New Teacher Project's experience with staffing policy reform elsewhere suggests that successful staffing systems are simple, timely, transparent, and fair. **TNTP urges Portland Public Schools and the Portland Association of Teachers to work together to overhaul the current staffing rules and processes with the goal of ensuring that the district can build, retain, and support a high-quality teaching force.**

### **About The New Teacher Project**

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the number of outstanding individuals who become public school teachers and creating environments for all educators that maximize their impact on student achievement. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited, prepared and/or certified approximately 23,000 high-quality teachers, worked with over 200 school districts, and established more than 40 programs in 23 states. TNTP has also published two major studies on teacher hiring and school staffing in urban areas: *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms* (2003) and *Unintended Consequences: The Case for Reforming the Staffing Rules in Urban Teachers Union Contracts* (2005). For more information, please visit [www.tntp.org](http://www.tntp.org).